

Failing the Challenge of Institutional Evaluation: How and Why Managerialism Flourishes

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Managerialism

A set of constituted and constitutive social practices involving actors inside and outside the institution, especially senior managers. It is associated with new public management, emphasising specification of outputs and targets, performance measurement as a means to its management, and business-inspired practices such as contracts for service, increased competition between HE providers, and a quasi-market framing students as customers (Dill 1998). Such practices risk creating a managerialist ideology purporting to elevate managers above the managed, misrepresenting management as something more than a necessary means to making HE work properly (Cuthbert 2007). Management can thus come to alienate the managed rather than be their natural support.

Evaluation

A “social practice bounded by the purpose, intention or function of attributing value or worth to individual, group, institutional or sectoral activity” (Saunders et al 2011). Constructing and using league tables are evaluative practices. Reid’s (2009) study of quality assurance in Australian HE showed how social practice can be shaped by discursive practice, itself derived from texts issued by a central agency which thereby became a central authority ‘disciplining’ universities to follow a particular approach. But in this process of establishing a discourse there is scope for senior managers to reconstruct policy in the way that Trowler (1998:114 *et seq*) describes as the most creative option for academics responding to change.

Rankings or ‘League Tables’

- Public attempts to rank universities or parts of universities according to their performance on various dimensions. Strongly classified, strongly framed evaluative practices which apparently allow little institutional discretion: “Institutions do not feel they have sufficient influence on the compilers and the methodologies used in the rankings.” (Locke et al 2008: 14).
- Times Good University Guide (UK), US News and World Report rankings (US), Times Higher Education, QS, Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings; HEFCE league table based on the National Student Survey
- League table proliferation has prompted rankings of rankings, notably by Yorke (1997) and Dill and Soo (2005).

Why people use league tables

- League tables “... are being used for a broader range of purposes than originally intended ...” (Locke et al 2008:15)
- For the media, they generate sales and readership
- For institutions, governments, staff, students and potential students they offer a simple overall assessment, a proxy for reputation (Tapper and Filippakou 2009) and a guide for policy and individual choices
- Institutions deliberately use league tables ‘as a short cut to reputation’ (Locke et al 2008:36).

How people use league tables

- League table evaluations first command attention: “The Board has set an institutional key performance indicator of improving the position in the league tables.” ...
- ... then shape other practices: “The aim of improving league table position ... is encouraging moves to stronger central and corporate management for some functions.” (Locke et al 2008:38)
- Reid’s (2009) analysis suggests that the league table ‘text’ can lead to a dominant discourse within the institution which shapes managerial and other social practices.

How people use league tables

Managers may be in denial: “... although a whole list of key performance indicators have been devised that are aligned with performance-related rankings, there is reluctance to accept the description ‘league table-driven.’” (p36). Staff, who like managers are usually critically aware of methodological flaws (Mroz 2009), are nevertheless subject to league-table-conscious supervision. If they cannot reconcile discrepancies between their own and the league table ‘judgements’: “... morale drops, and sometimes they blame senior management, other departments or those responsible for the data returns.” (Locke et al 2008:39-40).

Audiences and uses

- For politicians, journalists and potential students: an apparently simple and comprehensible guide to “which is best”. Hence league tables are extremely important for institutions and their reputations.
- “Evaluation, however, takes on different meanings at an institution and system level.” (Minelli et al 2008:170) - within institutions for improving practice, at system level for quality assurance (Stensaker and Harvey 2013), for disciplining the recalcitrant, and so on.
- Responding to external pressure can lead to internal uses in target-setting which overvalue or are perceived as overvaluing the league table. Managers usually regard league tables, externally produced using official statistics, as beyond their individual influence, and aim simply to use rankings selectively for public relations.

What is to be done?

“... there is an onus on policy makers and HE institutions to promote greater public understanding of league tables and alternative sources of information about HE institutions. “ (Locke et al 2008:61)
Governors and managers might make a difference if, instead of internalising league table measurements, they developed alternative approaches to evaluation which were a better fit with institutional mission and academic values. Managers have a choice: to accept and thereby to amplify league table evaluations, or to try to educate students, staff and lay governors about the work of the institution by developing a different discourse, using explicitly different terms, and ensuring alternatives are used internally.

What is to be done?

- Systematic resistance eg through benchmarking clubs
- Different kinds of institutional research and planning support
- Changing the focus/foci of evaluation: storytelling
- Using social media (website traffic analysis, 'satellite' websites, sentiment analysis)
- Reputation management:
 - Managing data
 - Managing information and communication
 - Choices about data availability (no alternative to transparency? London Met –v- Wolverhampton)

What is to be done?

- League tables 'count what is measured' rather than 'measuring what counts' (Locke et al 2008).
- Rich descriptions of HE purpose (Robbins 1963, Dearing 1997) defy reduction to a single measure. The challenge to managers is to reconcile that inevitable truth with the equally inevitable wish of external audiences to find simple metrics for their narrow purposes.
- The managerialist turn: measurement, target-setting, KPIs sit uneasily with the more qualitative commitment of staff motivated by higher ideals than ticking boxes in the corporate strategy
- Qualitative evidence – case studies, human stories, prizes, awards – can rebalance the league table story: journalism thrives on human interest, and prefers stories to statistics.

Beyond dialectical managerialism

To reconcile internal and external demands, institutional evaluation must take forms acceptable to and usable by external audiences, but which also reflect academics' views of 'embedded issues of values and of the purposes of social inquiry' (Henkel 1998:286). The challenge is to find a synthesis which goes beyond Watson's (2009) caricatures of academic populism and new managerialism.

Academic populism is unconstructive resistance; managerialism is undue domination of the practical 'wisdom' that in fact relies too much on an analytic-rational paradigm of management unsuited to much performance management in HE (Cuthbert 2007). Both are inadequate responses to the legitimate challenge of institutional evaluation for accountability.

Beyond dialectical managerialism

In responding to evaluations managers make choices often represented in either-or terms:

- summative or formative
- improvement or justification
- quality enhancement or quality assurance
- playing Government's game or promoting educational values

This reduces resistance to mere opposition: we need to do more than change evaluation **methods**. Co-opting peer review, for example, does not necessarily imply greater legitimacy (Henkel 1998) – witness the RAE. The challenge is to transcend this 'dialectical managerialism' by seeking synthesis.

Piecemeal social engineering

- Bringing different theories and values into the evaluation process (Reid 2009)
- Not necessarily big decisions, but frequent reaffirmation of core educational/academic values in small ways, in particular reaffirmation by senior staff for middle managers, who might otherwise assume, perhaps wrongly, that managerialist thinking is expected. An example: 'not enough firsts' (York, TVU, UWE).
- Use social media more creatively and authentically

Can we do it?

- Dill and Soo (2005): global league tables are converging on a common definition of academic quality
- Enders (2009) points to the danger of 'organisational isomorphism' as institutions indulge in a 'costly academic reputation race' and league tables become key influences in constructing the HE field by defining what matters most for globally leading universities
- Kehm and Stensaker (2010) have supplied the demolition work needed to clear the ground for better alternatives
- Work on alternatives, such as the EU-funded project by CHERPA, is needed to counteract league table reductionism (http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/news1416_en.htm)

Yes we can, but only if ...

Managers can change how they think about managing, to respond better to staff expectations, student demand, financial restriction, public and journalistic scrutiny, and Government requirements. These conflicting pressures demand creative management thinking as well as good judgement. Managers shape institutional narratives to make external ambiguity manageable for Governors, staff and students. If they over-use rationalistic analysis, targets and key performance indicators as 'weapons' to respond to the 'attacks' they face, they may reinforce the very problem which causes the pressure - the inappropriately managerialist framing of evaluation questions. Mechanistic responses which do not sufficiently acknowledge academic and educational values reproduce external managerialist practices within the institution.

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